Nixon in Calif.: An Angry, Isolated Man

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SAN CLEMENTE, Calif., July 5 — The man who, early in his presidency became one of history's most private public figures, now under the pressure of Watergate has built a shield around himself making him more of a mystery figure than ever at a time when he needs public understanding the most.

Only occasionally do glimpses of the human being emerge.

Bringing his hand down on his desk one day this week, he exclaimed to an assistant: "We did release the May 22 statement, didn't we?"

It was an expression of President Nixon's exasperation over the fact that the question is raised over and over in Congress and in the press whether he will reply to Watergate charges.

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"Do people read it on May 22 and file it on May 23 and expect it to be issued again and again?" he asked with more feeling than he ever shows in public.

The President was referring, of course, to his most recent statement on Watergate, the lengthy printed document declaring that he did not know about the Watergate break-in in advance, did not know about the cover-up until March and never offered executive clemency to the Watergate burglars.

There was another glimpse of the human being at a press conference Ronald L. Ziegler held at the San Clemente Inn Tuesday. Ziegler was asked for comment about a Los Angeles Times report that special prosecutor Archibald Cox had begun an inquiry into the President's purchase of his Key Biscayne and San Clemente homes.

Ziegler called the report "unfounded, malicious and scurrilous.

"These types of stories continue to run, the innuendo and the suggestions continue to fly out of this environment, and it is unjust, it is unfair, and it is not in my mind relevant to our way of life in this country for this type of smear charge to be made against the President of the United States," the press secretary said.

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Nixon in Calif.: Image of Angry, Isolated Man

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"Is what you are saying a reflection of the President's point of view?" a reporter asked.

"Absolutely," Ziegler replied.

"Is he mad?"

"I would say that the President is appalled by these consistent efforts being undertaken in the malicious—I din't know whether you can say libelous in terms of the President—but these constant efforts to suggest that there has been in any way wrongdoing associated with the purchase of this property," Ziegler replied.

Another aide thinks Mr. Nixon believes he has been more heavily damaged by stories reporting that the government spent more than a million dollars at San Clemente erecting flagpoles, building guardhouses, installing a new furnace and planting flowers—all in the name of security—than he has by Watergate.

The picture painted by these blimpses of the President is one of a man besieged, of an angry man cooped up behind the walls of his estate here, of a man who is a victim of all sorts of charges, that "fly out of this environment."

The few aides who know the President well and will talk deny that that is an accurate portrait.

They insist that he is not frustrated and that he is not in a distraught state. He recognizes fully the scope and impact of the Watergate scandal, they say, and he understands the political realities and is well informed about public opinion.

But they assert that his state of mind is not one of being under siege. He knows that his May 22 statement is accurate, and eventually will be accepted, they maintain, despite the formidable charges by John W. Dean III and other former assistants.

Asked if the President believes he can ever regain public confidence, they reply that he is confident he will because his actions over the months ahead will demonstrate he is the leader of the country.

Picturing a man who is convinced that he will remain in office until Jan. 20, 1977, they say that his actions, programs and policies will restore his credibility.

To the question whether he can govern with the heavy clouds over his presidency, the inner circle replies emphatically that he can and is. He is making decisions. He is actively working on a wide range of programs and policies. He has conducted significant foreign policy initiatives, the aides reply.

But just as J. Fred Buzhardt, special counsel to the President, said in an interview with The Washington Post last week, informants here say that the President still is puzzled by what happened, still is searching for the answers and still is unclear what step he should take next.

They repeat that prior to the March disclosures he asked over and over whether there was any White House involvement in Watergate, and repeatedly said, "Let's get the facts out." They seem to have faith that the Dean accusations, which they acknowledge did enormous damage, can be successfully rebutted.

Reporters who cover the President really do not know the whole truth about any of these matters. A single walk with LBJ told them more about the man than countless interviews with Nixon staff members. Reporters surely do not know what is racing through the mind of this President as he labors long hours in the seclusion of his home and office here.

Reporters last questioned Mr. Nixon at a news conference on March 15. They never have a private word with him. They see him only on formal occasions when he greets a visitor or signs a bill or poses for a picture.

Surprisingly, the 60-year-old chief executive, who has seldom been far from a crisis, looks well. He may appear somewhat older than he did a year or two ago, but not much. He sometimes walks more slowly and occasionally shows signs of fatigue as he boards his plane.

But the deep lines that marked Lyndon B. Johnson's face in the last harrowing years of his presidency have not developed in Mr. Nixon's face. He still looks like a man considerably younger than his three-score years.

Mr Nixon does not appear to have lost or gained weight since he entered the White House more than four years ago. His color is good. Those around him insist that he is mentally alert and is spending a great amount of time on issues other than Watergate.

He does spend many hours on Watergate, it is conceded, but he concentrates on other issues as well. This week, according to one informant, he has conferred at length on Cambodia, relations with China, the energy shortage, the federal budget, development of the phase IV economic controls, the European security conference, and other problems.

The aides picture the President at a grave disadvantage because he does not know what the next charges may contain. He earnestly believes that he must act to defend the separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches and at the same time await the verdict of the courts, they report.

Because of these considerations, he is inhibited in what he can say and in the appeals he can make to the voters in this most agonizing crisis he has faced.

Only one thing seems certain, and that is that the inner turmoil even for this well-disciplined President must be greater than is admitted. For it was much less than a year ago, although it seems years, that Richard Nixon was re-elected by one of the great landslide victories. He was determined to bring about major foreign and domestic reforms. Yet, in a short time, he has almost been hounded out of office by his old enemies in the Democratic Party, the press and the intellectual community who he humiliated last November.